

# Social isolation health message fails to cut through

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People tend to underestimate the importance of social factors for health. Credit: University of Queensland

Social isolation has been shown to pose a greater health threat than smoking, poor diet and lack of exercise – but that message is failing to get through to the community.

However, a new study led by University of Queensland School of Psychology researcher Professor Alex Haslam shows that people remain largely unaware of the importance of [social connectedness](#) for [health](#).

UQ researchers surveyed more than 500 people from the United States and the United Kingdom to assess their views about the importance of social and behavioural risk factors for life expectancy.

"Although research shows that lack of [social integration](#) and support are the most important determinants of mortality, we found that people tend to see them as among the least important," Professor Haslam said.

"Our survey indicated that only around 15 per cent of people saw these social factors to be as important for mortality as they are.

"Men, younger participants, and those with a lower level of education were more likely to underestimate the importance of [social factors](#) for health, as were people who believed in the importance of authority and convention.

"These results suggest that education has a role to play in increasing awareness, in the same way that we have seen very successful campaigns to quit smoking, exercise more, and have a healthy diet.

"We also need to question the conventional view of health as something that is purely physical and medical.

"We know from a wealth of previous research that people who are more socially connected live longer and have better health than those who are socially isolated."

He said a study recently published in *Psychological Science* showed that loneliness increased the risk of premature death by about 30 per cent.

"As alarming as the evidence is about the detrimental health effects of [social isolation](#), the message clearly isn't getting through," Professor Haslam said.

"In saying that, there are some encouraging signs on the horizon.

"In the UK, for example, there is a strong push to encourage GPs to offer 'social prescribing' as part of their treatment for patients with a range of conditions including stress, trauma, ageing, depression, addiction, eating disorders and brain injury.

"Social prescribing focuses on building people's social connections by linking them with social or physical activities in their community such as local sports, arts and voluntary organisations.

"This new way of treating health conditions has been shown in our ongoing research to have a wide range of benefits."

The research is published in *Social Science and Medicine*, and the [importance](#) of social connected is documented in *The New Psychology of Health: Unlocking the Social Cure*.

**More information:** S. Alexander Haslam et al. Social cure, what social cure? The propensity to underestimate the importance of social factors for health, *Social Science & Medicine* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.12.020](#)

The New Psychology of Health: Unlocking the Social Cure.  
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Provided by University of Queensland

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